DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 397 440 CS 215 409

AUTHOR Corbin, Susan
TITLE Understanding Student Voice as a Means to Power.
PUB DATE 27 Mar 96
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Blacks; Ethnicity; Higher Education; *Language Role; Minority Groups; *Nonstandard Dialects; Power Structure; Racial Bias; *Reader Response; Social Class; *Student Empowerment; Teacher Student Relationship; *Writing (Composition); Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse; *Voice (Rhetoric)

ABSTRACT

Students' conversational skills, sense of importance, and penchant for creating drama can create thoughtful and even powerfully compelling prose but only if readers let it. Unfortunately, the ways that beginning writers express ideas do not always match all readers' expectations. What does this have to do with what teacher-researchers call voice? Voice is often discussed in terms of writing that imitates the rhythms of speech or as a presence that shines through the text. But the practical question that gets asked again and again is how does the reader find voice on the printed page. In surveying the literature, what becomes apparent is the role of the reader in determining the presence of voice. Perhaps readers or instructors should start thinking of voice more in terms of the imperialistic power of language preferences and the resulting disenfranchisement of others. Papers that do not match conventional expectations are easier to discredit or dismiss as being out of control or incomprehensible. This means that students who live outside the White standard, Aglo-American, Christian, and economically prosperous parameters are liable to write in "unorthodox" or "incorrect" ways. In her book, "Justice and the Politics of Difference," Iris Marion Young discusses how denying difference contributes to oppression. Denying young writers the opportunity to use a form of language most comfortable to them may be seen as one form of this oppression. (TB)

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Susan Corbin
The University of Akron
CCCC Milwaukee, WI
27 March 1996

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S. Corbin
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Understanding Student Voice as A Means to Power

Students' conversational skills, sense of importance, and penchant for creating drama can create thoughtful and even powerfully compelling prose but only if we readers let it. This allowance obviously depends on a certain type of reader. Obviously though, the ways that beginning writers express ideas don't always match all readers' expectations.

What does this have to do with what teacher-researchers call voice? In my mind, voice is just one more way to think about language, specifically about text.

During the slow process of trying to figure out what people mean by voice, how to identify it, and even how to think about it in relation to student writing, I have come to think of voice primarily in terms of the reader and her relationship with text and her impression of the writer. For some people, this means textual conventions signal the presence of voice. In other words, voice is style. But it can also represent the power scenarios that occur during the production and monitoring of text. And, it is in this way that voice influences writing classrooms everyday.

Voice is often discussed in terms of writing that imitates the rhythms of speech or as a presence that shines through the text. But the practical question that gets

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asked again and again is how do we find voice on the printed page? Well, it's not quite as simple as that. Even if it were simply a matter of style and we could look only for textual markers, theories of voice entail many other aspects of the writing and reading process as well. Voice resists the convenience of simple definition. It's not one thing that can be pointed at and labeled.

In surveying the literature, what does become apparent is the role of the reader in determining the presence of voice. To give you a sense of what I mean, I'll quote Randall Albers' 1989 NCTE conference paper, although he by no means is the only person who describes voice in this way. Albers describes being able to recognize voice "when we hear the presence . . . of the speaker addressing an audience, her voice taking its place in the conversation with other voices, including that of the reader." It is the "we" that makes me consider voice in terms of the reader's perceptions and not the romantic and now infamous "magic writing" that Peter Elbow described in Writing Without Teachers so many years ago (65). "We," the community of teachers that represent The Readers of student-authored texts, recognize voice only when "we" allow writers the authority to write as they are able and in the manner they choose.

So, perhaps what we ought to consider when examining the webs of relations associated with language, especially the way certain discourses are privileged or marginalized, is

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that students usually aren't given much credit for the ways they write. Pam Gilbert seems to agree with this point in her article "From Voice to Text: Reconsidering Writing and Reading in the English Classroom." As she argues, voice entails a reading practice (201); papers are credited with voice because the reader perceives or grants it, not because voice is an inherent quality of text. Voice can also take on moral tones when texts are evaluated as either "good" or "bad," depending on how well they conform to conventions that readers expect. So much for student empowerment.

Maybe we should start thinking of voice more in terms of the imperialist power of our language preferences and the resulting disenfranchisement of others'. Papers that don't match the conventional expectations are easier to discredit or dismiss as being out of control or incomprehensible. Which means African-American students using Black English Vernacular, Jewish students using Yiddish, students of Hispanic, Asian, or any other nationality, ethnicity, or socio-economic identity who live outside of the white, standard, Anglo-American, christian, and economically prosperous parameters are liable to write in so-called "unorthodox" or "incorrect" ways. If readers use voice as a means of legitimizing text as was suggested earlier, how does this affect the ways knowledge gets made and the people getting to participate? Who is getting to "voice" their opinion? Or perhaps this really is not an issue anymore

because students aren't qualified to join the social conversation and help make meaning.

In her book Justice and the Politics of Difference, Iris Marion Young discusses how denying difference contributes to oppression. It's a discussion that I think applies well to many of the other conversations involving voice. Teachers in their authorizing, evaluatory role in the classroom can unwittingly become regulators of language and propriety, and we can become "unmindful that there might be other positions to articulate" (127) and most definitely different ways of communicating those positions. As an authorizing device, voice becomes just another means of controlling access to text in a print mediated culture.

Students, especially those who are marginalized by their language, are aware of this exclusion. Students sometimes do try exerting their authority in text. One way they do this is by referring to themselves and their experiences almost exclusively. While the first person does not necessarily create a sense of voice, it does affect readers, especially when nearly every sentence begins with "I" or refers to "me." This is not a marker that can possibly explain everything that reader's perceive and writer's intend. But, it does make me contemplate what's happening as I read student papers.

Some people would argue that using the first person so much is bad form, unaware, monologic, self-centered and best

avoided. But, what about what the student might think or intend? What if the first person singular is the most natural way for beginning writers to lodge their ideas in print, a place that might otherwise try to keep the unusual out. What if we teacher-readers think of this as one of many aspects of writing and the enfranchising or disenfranchinsing potential of voice?

In a sense, the writer who emphasizes herself is taking a stand. The writer is clearly telling the reader what she thinks in a way that to a reader could sound authoritative and strong. When given space to write, I wonder whether some students write this way in order to intentionally drown out or disregard the voices of others that rhetorically savvy writers try to accommodate because parents, teachers, and bosses usually spend all their time with young people telling them what to do rather than listening or discussing. But, to the academic audience unaccoustomed or insensitive to this first attempt to seem powerful, the cummulative effect of so many repeating references to "I," "I," "I" can be either effective or maddening. Complicated thoughts do get tangled. But, what about granting students some authority to go ahead and try expressing ideas and a "voice" as best they can?

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